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ABSTRACT

Current policy analysis has proved less useful in improving public policy formation than policy scientists once argued it would. At least part of the reason for this lies in the fact that policy analysis has concentrated too narrowly on economic paradigms in teaching and practice, minimizing the evaluation of consequences outside that field. To be truly effective, policy analysis should have a multidisciplinary focus, combining insights from many social and natural sciences. Greater political science input at the level of teaching and practice can lead to a more holistic, and ultimately more useful, analytical science. Such an enterprise would be concerned with a greater range of problems and solutions and assessment criteria and would be more sensitive to the needs of elected officials and interest groups involved in the policy process. (LP)

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Political Science and Policy Analysis: Contributions of the Discipline to Training Producers

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Political Science and Policy Analysis: Contributions of the Discipline to Training Producers

This paper explores the role of political science in educating people who perform policy analysis in public bureaucracies. Policy analysts are defined as applied scientists who study the nature, causes and effects of alternative public policies, using the theories and methodologies of relevant academic disciplines to choose the "best" policy to achieve a given goal.[1] Typically, analysts evaluate policies that have already been enacted but occasionally they compare hypothetical alternatives.

The education of policy analysts is similar to the education of engineers in that both draw on several basic sciences for information to solve real-world problems. The key science for engineers seems to be physics although they also use insights from chemistry, geology and biology. No consensus exists on whether a key science undergirds analysis or on the optimal mix of social sciences a policy analyst's education ought to contain.

A number of commentators have suggested that in current public policy programs political science's role is subordinate to economics as the social science providing the major theoretical rationale and direction for evaluating policy.[2] A New York Times summary of graduate policy courses noted that they leaned heavily on the work being done in business schools, whose curricula include more economics than political science.[3] This link to economics occurs even though some public administration scholars see policy analysis as public administration in new "scientific" clothing with both disciplines originally offshoots of political science.[4]

The question of disciplinary connection is not simply an exercise in scholarly classifying. Disciplines differ in their central concerns and orientations. Economics and political science have certain similarities. Both study the allocation of scarce resources. Both use such concepts as "system," "input-output," and "goal." But political science is the only discipline whose primary focus encompasses the struggle of individuals and groups to secure the authoritative support of government for their values.[5]

The argument of this paper is that political science input is essential in educating public policy analysts if they are to function effectively in the public setting where much of this struggle unfolds. Current policy programs may rely more on economics because they find it a "tighter" science (in ways we shall explore later), but minimizing political science's role results in less useful analysis whether we define "use" as specific input into current legislation or diffuse influence.[6] Dominance by one discipline has led to overnarrow concentration on problems and criteria central to that discipline. It minimizes the analysis of consequences outside economic's traditional purview. To advance this argument we need to describe the abilities analysts use and analyze the unique contributions political science makes to their development.

Analysts' Needs

McRae divides the task of policy analysis into four elements: problem definition; selection of comparison criteria; comparison of alternative policies, predicting expected consequences through models of causation; and analysis of the political feasibility of the chosen policy's enactment.[7] To perform all of these elements effectively, analysts need technical

statistical skills, awareness of the range of problems and criteria that are important in public evaluations and knowledge of the political process through which policy is made. Let us examine each of these skill areas in turn.

Technical Skills

Technical skills form the bedrock on which the analyst's work rests. Elected officials base their authority on the voter's mandate; analysts predicate their influence on the use that can be made of their scientific knowledge.

An agency hires analysts because of their expertise in using objective research techniques. This means that effective analysts must be experts in methodology. They know regression and correlation, cost/benefit analysis, parametric and non-parametric statistics, linear programming and the use of electronic data processing systems. They understand the concept of meaningful measurement. They can construct opinion surveys.

Rigorous technical proficiency is crucial because analysts face a difficult task. Conclusions they reach may attack the preconceived notions of other political actors. Such opponents are likely to respond by looking for chinks in the analyst's technical armor. Prove technical incompetence, or even minor mishandling of formulae, and you cast doubt on the validity of entire research findings.

Range of Problems and Solutions

Command of technique is a necessary but insufficient prerequisite to success as an analyst. Evaluators need to develop an intuition concerning which problems are worth handling. Not every topic makes a good candidate for analysis. Some are overcomplex. Others cry out for strictly political rather than "rational" solutions. Conversely,

problems that seem overcomplex at first may be translated into a form amenable to analysis by a trained evaluator. One of the qualities that distinguishes effective analysts is their ability to formulate important analyzable problems and define the relevant environments in which to test alternative solutions to them.[8]

Range of Criteria

Analysts in the public sector also need a sense of the range of criteria that are appropriate for evaluating public policies. Finding criteria to measure private-sector achievement is fairly easy. Profit is the chief goal in business; policies either provide profit at a certain rate or they do not.[9] Finding criteria to measure public goals is more difficult since public policies have multiple aims, many vague and intangible (e.g., increase justice, promote intercultural understanding). The education of analysts has to lead them to make a sustained effort to develop performance measures that are suitable for assessing progress towards the actual goals of a public system.

Political Savvy

Analysts make a contribution when they convince decision makers to use their analysis. A fourth ability area, consequently, relates to understanding the political process through which various public decisions are formed.

The political and analytic processes are neither natural nor easy partners.[10] Elected officials base their decisions on political criteria including the assumed preferences of their constituents. Their special knowledge is often subjective in nature, collected through campaigning,

reading the mail and chatting with lobbyists.[11] Bargaining and compromise are the key concepts in their approach to problem solution--not scientific "virtues" of comprehensiveness and rational choice (although some politicians pay deference to social science and believe analysts can and should solve certain problems[12]).

For political officials to use analysis, they have to see how its findings relate to their political agendas. The education of analysts has to prepare them to comprehend which political officials are likely to form the audience for a given analysis, the range of policy options in which these people will have an interest, and the mechanism for explaining the benefits of a particular evaluation in relation to their political agendas. At the least, the analyst must be able conceptually to locate the complex array of individuals and groups who are likely to have an interest in and some clout over forming and implementing a given policy.

The Contribution of Political Science

Of the four abilities discussed in the previous section, political science can make a unique contribution to developing three. Only an analyst's technical skills might be developed as fully in an apolitical program. In general, political science has not generated its own technical methodologies borrowing instead from economics, statistics and operations research.[13] The contribution of political science lies in increasing the range of problems analyzed, broadening the criteria considered in

policy assessment and giving analysts insights into the likely feasibility of various policy options. The thrust of political science is to broaden the type of policy evaluated and the type of criteria deemed useful in analysis. Some concerns of political science may appear soemwhat "loose" or "sloppy" to an apolitically-trained analyst because they are harder (at present) to fit into formal models, but, nonetheless, they are vital to holistic evaluation.

Problems/Solutions

Political science and economics both have a concern with problems in the delivery of goods and services, regulation, monitoring and enforcement. In addition, political science has an interest in two problem areas that have not been of central concern to economics and, hence, have not been a focus of much actual analysis. One is the problem of mandating effective agency structures, comparing the advantages and disadvantages alternative organization has on service delivery.[14] The other area is related to "meta-policies," i.e., those policies that set the frame for the way a given regime makes decisions.[15]

Structure. While current economically-oriented policy evaluators downplay the importance of structural analysis, administrative structure has been an ongoing interest of political science since the turn-of-the-century "Reform" era. As part of this interest, political scientists in the 1960s and 1970s debated the benefits of administrative decentralization in education and other services.

At present, when Congress or state legislatures enact programs, structural decisions are typically made on on an ad hoc basis. Policy analysts have not by and large urged systematization of structural mandates, perhaps because governmental structure is at best a peripheral concern of economics, perhaps

because it is difficult to estimate formally cost/benefits of structural change. Giving policy analysts greater familiarity with the political science literature on structure may lead them to see the potential importance of structural changes. They may then press to learn more about the impact of structure through politically-sanctioned experimentation, manipulating structural variables and observing how the delivery of services or the rate of regulation changes as an agency's organization is modified. Sensitivity to the consequences of structure is an important gain for the analyst (and for effective policy), particularly in a retrenchment era where reorganization may be one of the few viable options for increasing performance.

Meta-Policies. Political science has a traditional concern with investigating the impact of policies that affect the making of decisions, analyzing the influence of political party systems, legislative procedures, and election laws on political life. While such impacts are often notoriously difficult to measure, Riker's recent exposition on the history of Duverger's law suggests that the discipline has accumulated some useful knowledge in this area (and can accumulate more).[16] While few policy analysts are going to be asked to assess systemic meta-policies, the study of political science should alert them to the possibility of authoritatively shifting decision rules as a means of increasing such values as popular support for or participation in a given program. Again, the study of political science broadens the analyst's conception of which variables can and should be the subject of analytic manipulation.

Criteria

Nowhere is the gap between economics and political science greater than in debates over the appropriate criteria for evaluating policy. Economics has a central normative construct--efficiency. Political science uses multiple criteria--accountability to elected officials, responsiveness to particular communities and equity as well as efficiency.[17]

Using multiple criteria places methodological burdens on evaluators. First, they must define each criterion operationally, a difficult task where equity and responsiveness are involved (how do you separate like and unlike cases?). Second, they must gauge the relative importance of each criterion and set strategies for dealing with conflicts. The most responsive policy may not be the most efficient; the most equitable may not be responsive to the needs of a particular community. Few established rules govern which trade offs are valued or even which should be allowed.

Two political scientists comment incisively on the need to use multiple criteria despite technical difficulties. Frederickson notes that our real interest is in long-term efficiency. Using measurable efficiency as the sole criterion impares our ability to predict long-term efficiency because responsive, equitable policies may really prove most efficient in the long run.[18] Anderson argues that efficiency is a lower-order criterion of political judgment, "basically a "tie-breaker" between policy options that have passed minimum tests of...justice."[19]

Current political science research contains numerous attempts, however tentative, to operationalize politically important criteria.[20] Analytical training should foster an interest in improving our ability to use all the politically-relevant criteria, not merely the one that is easiest to fit into existing models. As Hoos notes, the most easily measurable variables are not necessarily the most important.[21]

Feasibility

Lindblom and Cohen note that of all the social sciences, political science seems to understand best the role of politics, as opposed to analysis, in conflict resolution.[22] This understanding emerges from the discipline's scrutiny of the political process, the complex, ironic, shifting terrain in which legislation is actually enacted and implementation proceeds. A central concern of modern political science has been identifying governmental and private actors with policy influence, showing the role of particular types of organizations in policy creation and administration.

Knowledge of the political process is essential for evaluators. They must know the nature of their audience--or, actually, audiences, because a great number of actors typically have a stake in and influence over policy proposals. Useful analysis requires the ability to communicate findings in such a way that they are seen as opening avenues of action to those who have decision-making authority--to those who can act. Effective communication, in turn, requires in-depth knowledge of who constitutes the audiences and how analysis affects their interests.

Political science has a literature on the generic role played by a given type of organization (e.g., public-employee labor unions) in the creation of policy. It has a literature on the interaction of various actors involved in developing a particular program.[23] Familiarity with both, will help analysts understand whose interests ride on their work and the role of social interaction in developing policies. This may lead to an analysis that is somewhat less faulted for being politically naive than current evaluation efforts that tend to focus on what is economically, rather than politically, rational.[24]

Conclusions

Policy analysis is a multidisciplinary endeavor if only because social problems know no disciplinary boundaries. The best analysts combine insights from many social and natural sciences.[25] As Wildavsky notes, in setting up a faculty for public policy training one tries to choose "economists interested in politics, political scientists interested in economics, and sociologists, lawyers, historians, philosophers, and so on, interested in both."[26]

At present, the dominance of economic paradigms in teaching and practice obscures public analysis' multidisciplinary nature. Dominance by one discipline has led to overnarrow concentration on problem/solutions and criteria central to that discipline. It minimizes the evaluation of consequences outside economics' basic purview.

Current policy analysis has proved less useful in improving public policy formation than policy scientists once argued it would. Part of the problem lies in the lack of a true multidisciplinary focus. Greater political science input at the level of teaching and practice can lead to a more holistic--and hence more useful--analytical science. Such an enterprise would be concerned with a greater range of problems/solutions and assessment criteria than analysis ca. 1983. It would be more sensitive to the needs of elected officials and interest groups involved in the policy process.

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